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Understanding the Yemeni Crisis: The transformation of tribal roles in recent decades

Helen Lackner

Luce Fellowship Paper No. 17

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Understanding the Yemeni crisis: The Transformation of Tribal Roles
in Recent Decades

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**UNDERSTANDING THE YEMENI CRISIS:
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by

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BIOGRAPHY

Helen Lackner has worked as a consultant in social aspects of rural development for four decades in over thirty countries, mostly in the Middle East, Africa and Europe. She has been involved in Yemen since the early 1970s and has lived and worked in all three Yemeni states. In the fifteen years she has spent in Yemen, she has resided in most of the country's governorates for different periods. She now focuses on analysis and writing about contemporary Yemen, trying to promote commitment to equitable development and peace in the country.

She published *A house built on sand: a political economy of Saudi Arabia* in 1978 (Ithaca Press) and *The People's Democratic Republic of Yemen: outpost of socialist development in Arabia* in 1985 (Ithaca Press); and she has edited two books on the Republic of Yemen, most recently *Why Yemen Matters: a society in transition* (Saqi, 2014). She has also written chapters on different aspects of Yemeni development for other collective books, including in 2016 analyses of civil resistance (*Civil Resistance in the Arab Spring: triumphs and disasters*, OUP, Adam Roberts et al. editors), climate change and security (*Climate Hazard Crises in Asia*, Routledge, forthcoming, Troy Sternberg editor), and Hadramaut social structure (*Migration from Yemen: the politics and identity of the Hadhrami diaspora*, I.B. Tauris, forthcoming, Noel Brehony editor). Her analysis of the transition period between 2011 and 2015 has been published by International IDEA as *Yemen's 'peaceful' transition from autocracy: could it have succeeded?* (2016). She is currently working on a book which will provide background understanding of the crisis, to be published by Saqi in 2017.

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Dhamar Governorate: preparing fields for rain-fed crops, April 2007. (Copyright Helen Lackner).



Ibb Governorate al Rudhma district, profits from qat, 2010. (Copyright Helen Lackner).

UNDERSTANDING THE YEMENI CRISIS: THE TRANSFORMATION OF TRIBAL ROLES IN RECENT DECADES

Helen Lackner

INTRODUCTION

Tribes are a fundamental element of Yemen's social fabric and therefore important in understanding the various levels of conflict in the country. They are vastly misunderstood, the term 'tribe' is often used in an anti-historical way, ignoring the changes which have taken place over the decades, within tribes and in their relations with others. Not only misunderstood, but also subject to multiple prejudices which caricature and generalise on the basis of selected characteristics about individual tribes. Disparaging¹ and indeed, insulting statements about tribes can be found with great ease in the media, even in academia and among educated people. Most of us involved in the region will certainly have experienced them on an almost daily basis. In particular urban people tend to despise tribesmen and use the word *bedu* to disparage both tribespeople and nomads. Among others, Corstange presents an excellent summary of these prejudices: "in the Yemeni context... the tribesmen are often stylized as uneducated, backward, ignorant, uncultured, tradition-bound, irrational, uncivilized and violent. These views are often strongest among city-dwellers, the educated elite, and those who strongly oppose the current governing regime in Yemen, which is associated with tribalism and tribal traditions. Unflattering jokes abound about the ignorance and stupidity of tribesmen, and the epithet 'tribal' is not infrequently used as a synonym for 'backward'.²

Other than demystification, there are many reasons why tribes and their changed nature and relationship to other social groups in Yemen are very relevant to the country's present and future. Here are just two examples:

- One outcome of the transition process which started in 2011 is that the country should become a federal state of six regions: should tribal allegiances be a relevant consideration in the definition of these regions' borders? Can they be? Is the tribal factor more or less relevant to this issue than water basins?³
- Among those prosecuting the current war, it was assumed that the allegiance of tribesmen could be ensured by the provision of incentives (as had been done during the civil war in the Yemen Arab Republic in the 1960s), but this has clearly not been the case. The military balance in the war over the past year has certainly been influenced by the allegiances of tribes on different fronts, but incentives have been unable to tip it. Had things been different, the coalition forces would have reached San'a months ago.

This paper addresses a set of related aspects of this problematic.

- First I briefly examine some of the debate around the nature of tribes and the wide range of phenomena described as tribal. This will clarify some of the misconceptions and misunderstandings about Yemen in general and its tribes in particular.
- This is followed by a description of Yemen's social structure at the time of the revolutions of the 1960s. This period is indicative of the situation for the preceding century or so. While I

¹ Tutwiler, R. (1987). *Tribes, tribute and trade: social class formation in highland Yemen*. PhD. State University of New York at Binghamton, p.149.

² Corstange, D. (2008). Tribes and the rule of law in Yemen. Paper presented to the Annual Conference of Middle East Studies Association (MESA), p.9.

³ For an analysis of the transition see: Lackner, H. (2016). *Yemen's 'peaceful' transition from autocracy: could it have succeeded?* Stockholm: International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance.

do not suggest for a moment that Yemeni society prior to this time was static or enjoying the 'eternal present' encountered in much traditional anthropological literature, this period roughly represents a state of affairs prior to the significant social, political and economic transformations which later fundamentally redesigned its social structure.

- The third part addresses changes in social structures since the 1970s, and the way in which these structures have fully developed since unification in 1990 as a result of modifications in the nature of the country's economic base. I will discuss the tensions which have arisen as a result, particularly through the emergence of a single elite combining military, economic and political power, and its impact on tribal relations and the nature of the tribe as a concept.
- Finally, I will assess the relevance of these changes in social formations on two of today's urgent issues, the role of political parties and the importance of *jihadism*. I conclude with some remarks on the extent to which the emerging social forces could contribute to a solution of the country's current deep crisis.

WHAT IS A TRIBE? CAN IT BE PART OF A MODERN STATE?

Both in ordinary life and among academics, tribes in the Middle East are usually assumed to have the following characteristics: they are rural, membership is based on kinship relations and on sets of segmentary lineages⁴, mutual solidarity is the basis for relationships within the tribe or sub-tribe, their political economy is based on nomadic pastoralism (sometimes complemented by oasis agriculture) in which raiding settled communities and each other is a basic source of income. Many authors⁵, and not only those from the Marxist tradition, see tribes as pre-state forms of political organization, while others see them as alternatives and challengers to the state. While supposedly egalitarian internally, most writers order them hierarchically on the basis of their economy, ranking camel herders first, followed by sheep and goat herders, and then settled agricultural tribes.⁶ For each of these characteristics, exceptions can be found, as we will see shortly.

Surprisingly, the International Encyclopaedia of Social Sciences does not even mention the Middle East or pastoral nomads in its discussion of tribes⁷, and readers are left wondering whether this is a reflection of lack of knowledge. The following fairly comprehensive definition of tribes, focused on the Middle East, will serve as a reliable reference point:

Tribe may be used loosely of a localised group in which kinship is the dominant idiom of organisation, and whose members consider themselves culturally distinct (in terms of customs, dialect or language, and origins); tribes are usually politically unified, though not necessarily under a central leader, both features being commonly attributable to interaction with states. Such tribes also form parts of larger, usually regional, political structures of

⁴ As neatly explained by Swagman 'tribal structure is segmentary, that is, tribes are composed of sections, subsections, sub-subsections and so on; the actual number of levels can vary.... a subsection might include ten or twenty villages spread out over a twenty or twenty-five square kilometre area... a *qabila* is made up of a number of sections, covering hundreds of square kilometers and may number thirty or forty thousand members' (Swagman, C. (1988). *Tribe and politics: an example from highland Yemen*. *Journal of Anthropological Research*, 44(3), p.252.) While segmentarism is out of fashion in recent writings, it may still be of some relevance.

⁵ Carapico, S. (1984). *The political economy of self-help development cooperatives in the Yemen Arab Republic*. PhD. University of New York at Binghamton, p.79; Khoury, P. and Kostiner, J. (1990). *Tribes and state formation in the Middle East*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

⁶ Among others, see: Jabar, F. (2003). *Sheikhs and ideologues: deconstruction and reconstruction of tribes under patrimonial totalitarianism in Iraq, 1968-1998*. In: F. Jabar and H. Dawod, eds, *Tribes and power: nationalism and ethnicity in the Middle East*, 1st ed. London: Saqi.

⁷ Darity Jr, W. ed. (2008). *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, vol. 8, 2nd ed. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, pp.449-451.

tribes of similar kinds; they do not usually relate directly with the state, but only through these intermediate structures.⁸

Tribes and the state

The academic⁹ and political debate about the role of tribes and their relationship to the state ranges widely between two extremes: some see tribes as entities which, by definition, oppose and compete with the state, while others see tribalism as a mechanism for supporting or complementing the state, as an intermediary institution between the state and village-level communities. Confirming yet again the importance of Ibn Khaldun, most contemporary discussions on the subject return to his analysis, either to support or challenge it. While there have often been tensions between centralised state authorities and the tribes within their territories, in practice, in the past century the hierarchy seems clear, and tribes operate within the various states around them.¹⁰ Recently, social anthropologists have adopted very similar interpretations, most prominent among them is Godelier.¹¹

Corstange, on the basis of fieldwork in Yemen in the first decade of the 21st century, has a more restrictive interpretation, believing that 'tribes, whatever else they may do and however else they may be valued by the members, act as second-best substitutes for an absent or weak state. They supply a modicum of security and the rule of law via the semi-private provision of tribal law, which serves as an imperfect substitute for state law'.¹²

In Yemen in recent decades, before discussing ex-president Saleh's relationship with tribes, it is worth noting that, by his actions rather than his rhetoric, he demonstrated understanding of his role in clearly authoritarian terms 'where the military *ghalaba* (domination) has ... made possible a generally unrestrained plunder of the society's available resources'.¹³ Although he asserted that Yemen is a 'tribal state' his interpretation of the role of tribes was far from its ideal model. He did indeed use standard tribal (and indeed European) dynastic models to strengthen his position by marrying into as many tribal and other groups as possible, in order to expand his loyalty base.¹⁴ His respect for most tribal norms, such as honour and consultation, was rather less notable.

There has been widespread cynicism about what has become known as *jumlukiyas*¹⁵ in the Arab world, i.e. the process whereby almost all the leaders of so-called republican states (most of whom came to power through military coups and then got themselves elected, and re-elected again and again) have tried to pass on their positions to their sons. In Saleh's case, given his view that Yemen is a tribal state, he would probably argue that he was following tribal tradition when trying to pass on the presidency to this son. Saleh's own tribe, Sanhan, is a minor branch of the Hashed tribal confederation, one of the two leading tribal groups in northern Yemen. His struggle against the al Ahmar family, the recognised leaders of that confederation, can also be interpreted as an attempted

⁸ R. Tapper, quoted in: Khoury, P. and Kostiner, J. (1990). *Tribes and state formation in the Middle East*, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, p.5.

⁹ See the many important contributions in: Khoury, P. and Kostiner, J., eds. (1990). *Tribes and state formation in the Middle East*. Los Angeles and London: University of California Press; Luciani, G. (1990). *The Arab state*. Los Angeles and London: University of California Press; Jabar, F. and Dawod, H. (2003). *Tribes and power: nationalism and ethnicity in the Middle East*. London: Saqi; Dawod, H., ed. (2004). *Tribus et pouvoirs en terre d'Islam*. Paris: Armand Colin; Weir, S. (2007). *A tribal order: politics and law in the mountains of Yemen*. London: British Museum Press.

¹⁰ Interpretation confirmed by Weir, S. (2007), *op. cit.* p.105.

¹¹ Godelier, M. (2004). A propos des concepts de tribu, ethnie et état, formes et fonctions du pouvoir politique. In: H. Dawod, ed., *Tribus et pouvoirs en terre d'Islam*, 1st ed. Paris: Armand Colin, p.296.

¹² Corstange, D. (2008). *Op.cit.* p.2.

¹³ Salamé, G. (1990). 'Strong' and 'weak' states: a qualified return to the *Muqaddimah*. In: G. Luciani, ed., *The Arab state*, 1st ed. London: Routledge, p.31.

¹⁴ Another example of this mechanism was Abdul Aziz ibn Saud, see: Kostiner, J. (1990). Transforming dualities: tribe and state formation in Saudi Arabia. In: P. Khoury and J. Kostiner, eds. (1990), *op. cit.* p.230.

¹⁵ A combination of the terms *jumhuriya* (republic) and *mamlakiya* (monarchy).

take-over of its leadership. His whole strategy in building an authoritarian state has been based on manipulating and distorting tribal procedures to strengthen his position at everyone's expense.

I will not further address this debate here, but rather simply say that in practice in Yemen in the past centuries, to retain and consolidate their power leaders at the central state level have found it opportune to co-operate and co-opt the tribes living within their territories, given the need for tribal military strength in order to face both external and internal potential threats. Tribes and tribal confederations are constituent elements of broader entities, with a distribution of responsibilities between the tribe and the state, each having a complementary role, working best in alliance through negotiations.

YEMENI SOCIAL STRUCTURE BEFORE THE UPHEAVALS OF THE REVOLUTIONS

Yemeni society is frequently described as tribal, leading to the widespread belief that all Yemenis are members of tribes. It is therefore useful to examine briefly the overall social structure of the country and some of the significant differences found across it. As no statistics are available on the subject, analysts are left with estimates. It is widely accepted that at least 70%, possibly up to 80%, of the country's population are members of tribes. So what are the other social groups? And what is or was their relationship to the tribes?

Yemeni social structure bears similarities with those found in other so-called tribal societies, and also has specificities which ensure its uniqueness. One feature of Yemeni tribes which conforms to the standard definitions is that they are rural. However, the ascribed or inherited nature of the occupation based categories has led to academic debate comparing Yemeni social structure with the south Asian caste system. The list below summarises hierarchically the overall situation, though there are some regional variations, particularly concerning exactly which occupation goes into which lower group.

- The top ranking social group is that of the *sada* (sg *sayyed*), sometimes and in some places known as Hashemites or *ashraf*. They claim descent from the Prophet and their roles are primarily religious and judicial. Until the 1962 Revolution, the northern part of the country was ruled by Zaydi *sada* Imams, and the main ideological characteristic of the Huthi movement today is its belief that *sada* have an innate right to rule. *Sada* also play a major political role in Hadramaut. Throughout the country, in addition to their religious and judicial roles *sada* are also landowners. Interestingly *sada* often live in villages where they form the totality or the majority of the population, rather than being dispersed in tribal villages.
- Just below *sada* in status are the *quda* (sg *qadi*), a group of people whose status has originated from their learning and who in the past acted as judges and bureaucrats. They have tribal origins and only became a distinct social group over centuries of practice.
- The next group, forming the vast majority of the population, are the tribespeople who are thus the mainstream of Yemeni society. In Yemen the overwhelming majority of tribespeople in the pre-revolutionary period were settled agriculturalists, primarily owner-cultivators, though there were already some who worked as sharecroppers. To deal with another myth, according to which the southern highlands are not tribal, tribes are found throughout the country. The difference resides in the level of political consolidation of tribal units, which ranges from small tribes of a few hundred people covering a village or a district and who are loosely associated with each other through common ancestry, to the well-known major confederations, in the northern highlands of the Hashed and Bakil and in the southern area of the Awlaqi. Tribes are the main arms-bearing group and were dominant in society as they were the formal and effective protectors of the rest of the population, both those ranking above below them.
- Below them were the groups considered weak¹⁶ (*da'if*) headed by traders and followed by

¹⁶ Distribution of activities and status hierarchies vary considerably for this group. For a useful table with the ranking given by different authors, see: Stevenson, T. (1985). *Social change in a Yemeni highlands town*. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, p.94.

- *bani khums* which included artisans of all kinds as well as the less despised among the service providers such as 'restaurant operators', heralds, barbers and blood letters and 'henna decorators' among women.
- Although the last mentioned were providing 'bodily' services, they were less despised than the *akhdam* considered the lowest social group whose status was worsened by a range of prejudices which still prevail today¹⁷ and who were below the '*abid*', i.e. slaves. Up to now, their main occupations are cleaning and begging, though they also occasionally work as casual cash labourers.

While slaves¹⁸ (*abid*) had been servants of wealthier households, pre-republic they had also formed the army and the administrative and bureaucratic class of local rulers, whether in Hadramaut, San'a, or the Tihama. This had two major implications, which enhanced their status post slavery: first they were in a position to give orders and demand obedience from all groups above them in the hierarchy thanks to their role as enforcers of state rulers' orders, and second, they could bear arms as soldiers, something which, otherwise, only tribesmen were allowed to do.

Slavery and formal ascribed statuses were legally abolished by the republics and, according to the constitution, all Yemeni citizens are equal. But in reality, these inherited status groups remain important and are part of daily reality. Most people know and mention that those around them belong to one or another of these groups and behaviour towards them varies accordingly. Although in recent decades ascribed status categories have both weakened and changed, they remain important. The main indicator of their persistence concerns intermarriage which is, indeed, the standard social anthropological method for assessing the strength of ascribed status.

In a fairly straightforward manner, social structure reflected the economic one. Except in the most arid areas with very small populations where nomadic herding prevailed and the coastal areas where fishing was the main activity, the Yemeni economy was based on cultivation everywhere. Tribespeople and *sada* owned land, and tribesmen and women cultivated their own land with assistance from their household members; at times of peak activity, family labour was complemented by exchange of labour and occasionally by hired workers.¹⁹ Holdings were small, but sufficient to provide a limited surplus used to pay for services from the non-cultivating groups, whether of higher or lower status. The few large landowners were mainly 'state' rulers. Tribesmen's governance role was to provide protection to the other groups. There were tribal sharecroppers though their numbers were limited and usually due to family impoverishment resulting from some misfortune or other. This is the main rational explanation for the idea of 'egalitarianism' within the tribes which is one of the prevailing beliefs about tribes and which, in my view, deserves more examination and discussion, given clear differences of wealth and sources of income. The few large landowners were mainly rulers.

Sada did in some areas in the northern highlands cultivate their own land, but this was rare. In most cases they had sharecroppers, either tribesmen or others. In the case of Hadramaut and some of the lowlands, where there were fewer agricultural tribesmen, cultivation became a low status occupation and specific groups sharecropped the land for the *sada*; there the term *jellah* (pl. *fellaheen*), which elsewhere means farmer, came to mean a specific low status cultivating group who under no circumstances were allowed to own land.²⁰ Hadrami tribes were more involved in nomadic and semi-

¹⁷ Dolores Walters devoted her PhD thesis to analysing the comparative levels of low-status groups and attempting to identify the origins of these phenomena. See: Walters, D. (1987). *Perceptions of Social Inequality in the Yemen Arab Republic*. PhD. New York University.

¹⁸ For a brief discussion of the status roles of slaves and *akhdam*, see: Meissner, J. (1987). *Tribes at the core: legitimacy, structure and power in Zaydi Yemen*. PhD, Columbia University, pp.165-170.

¹⁹ See: Weir, S. (2007), *op.cit.* pp.33-35.

²⁰ See: Lackner, H., (forthcoming, 2017). Rural life and land tenure in Wadi Hadhramaut: links with outmigration. In: N. Brehony, ed., *Migration from Yemen: the politics and identity of the Hadhrami diaspora*. London: I.B. Tauris; Dostal, W. (1984). Squire and peasant in Tarim: a study of "rent capitalism" in southern

nomadic pastoralism, complementing the limited resource of the remote pasturelands by grazing their animals on crop residues after the harvest (and thus fertilising the soil).

So agricultural production was the mainstay of economic life for the majority of the population, and the higher status groups had access to the services of artisans producing agricultural tools and other objects needed for household use and clothes. Trade was minimal in the rural areas and exchange of crops for services was standard practice. The currency used, the Maria Theresa dollar, was heavy and inconvenient, but used for the few cash transactions, mostly in the towns and weekly markets. The service-provider lower status groups resided in villages or small towns near the weekly markets and travelled around as needed.

Sada and *quda* performed their judicial tasks, as called for, at home or at the weekly markets and people brought their problems and conflicts to them.²¹ Overall there was little interaction with the towns, none of which could qualify as cities; they were the location for the rulers and for the centralised administrative activities, as well as trade. Even the coastal ports had limited trade, though the southern coast was different and its ports were the starting point for outmigration to south and south-east Asia for people from Hadramaut and Shabwa from the 18th century onwards, while mountain people from further west headed to East Africa through Aden and Mokha. Most people usually left as a result of economic need and drought. However, until the 20th century there was little outmigration from the northern and central Highlands.

In brief the economy was agricultural with tribal households operating on a more or less self-sufficient, not to say subsistence, base, paying for services in staple grains from the higher and lower status groups to whom they also provided protection. In some areas, tribal groups formed long-term associations which created the larger confederations (Hashed, Bakeel, Madhaj, Awlaqi) though groups within them could shift alliances. The majority remained small with only a few thousand members. International or even internal trade were insignificant, with a few exceptions, Aden being the main one from the late 19th century onwards: it has strong urban characteristics, based on the port and the needs of the comparatively large administrative sector, whose positions were mostly filled by Indians and Somalis, due to the fact that Aden was administered from Bombay till well into the 20th century. Coastal ports also had a major role early on in the export of coffee and later the import or rice and other basic commodities, such as tea and sugar.

With Ottoman occupation in the north, and later attempts at centralisation of taxation under the Imamate after 1918 on the one hand, and British rule in the south also in the 20th century, the situation started to change. I will survey these changes before moving on to the post-revolutionary period. The presence of urban-based dominant structures had only a limited impact on rural life, but it was at the root of what came later. Alongside taxation in the north and support for compliant tribal leaders in the protectorates came some mechanisation, particularly of irrigation, an expanded role for trade and imported goods, while emigration expanded due to first the discovery of its potential and second the need for cash to acquire the goods arriving through the ports.

CHANGES IN SOCIAL STRUCTURE SINCE THE 1960s

The upheavals of the 1960s were not only political: that decade can be summarised as one of struggle to establish the new republican regime in the north (the Yemen Arab Republic), and of anti-colonial struggle in the south culminating in the establishment of the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen, taking over from Aden and the Protectorates. Major political, social and economic transformations were initiated at that time, but they really only took off under the new regimes during the following two decades and after unification into the Republic of Yemen in 1990. Given the very different

Arabia. In: Dostal, W., ed., *On social evolution*. Vienna: Vienna Contributions to Ethnology and Anthropology, pp.232-233.

²¹ See: Weir, S. (2007), *op. cit.* chapters 6 and 7.

regimes and the consequences of their different development today, I will first outline the socio-economic formations which developed in this period separately for each state.²²

The Yemen Arab Republic (YAR)

Life for citizens of the YAR changed dramatically in the 1970s when the previous agricultural economy was undermined by mass migration to Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states after the 1973 oil price rises and the construction boom that then flourished in those countries. This was particularly pronounced in the central and northern highlands which had previously seen little migration, while men from the southern uplands had already been migrating in large numbers via Aden for a few decades.

In 1975, 89% of the resident population was rural²³ and 74% of the total population worked in agriculture,²⁴ and only 5% in construction. Hundreds of thousands of mostly young Yemeni men migrated to Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states to work for cash in unskilled jobs, returning home for short periods to spend time with their families and distribute cash and goods to a broad range of relatives. This simultaneously demonstrated their success, improving their status within the community, and transformed the economy away from self-sufficiency through the industrial goods they brought back. It was also a first step in undermining the authority structure within the household and village. Previously the household head had controlled all income and the distribution of tasks; now young men were providing the cash which was used initially to purchase luxury goods and major investments and, gradually, as home produced crops became insufficient, basic necessities. As their contribution was the major source of finance, they also started demanding the right to take part in deciding community level investments through the Local Development Associations.²⁵ In the relatively well watered terraced highlands which had depended on rain fed cultivation of subsistence crops (sorghum, maize, wheat) many terraces were allowed to deteriorate: the strongest men were away and they sent home far more cash than could be earned from the fields, so there was no perceived need to maintain the terraces.

A commercial economy emerged, with weekly markets becoming permanent; the production of local handicrafts declined, partly due to their high cost, and was replaced by imports of cheap and fashionable industrial goods. As described by Tutwiler, this gradually changed the status of traders. As its financial returns improved, trade ceased to be considered shameful or demeaning: tribesmen, *sada* and *quda* engaged in it. This contributed to shifting status rankings from occupation to wealth, from ascribed to acquired. Tutwiler noted in 1987 “[there is a] major cultural redefinition of an entire occupational category as more and more tribesmen seek to enter petty commerce. Since the revolution tribesmen moving from agriculture to commerce have not suffered a loss of social prestige or political status.”²⁶ By the 1980s thanks to remittances the regime had “replaced a national dependence on grain cultivation and a self-contained system of stratified redistribution of surpluses in kind with an open door policy that avowedly sought integration with the global capitalist economy...”²⁷ The combination of cheap imports, the rise of a commercial bourgeoisie and the appropriation of land by few large landlords and officials resulted in the emergence of a class structure and exacerbated socio-economic differentiation leading to comparable political changes in the power structure. Tutwiler’s analysis of Mahweet in the northern highlands is largely valid for many parts of the YAR in the early to mid-1980s when he did his fieldwork.

²² For more background on the country, see: Lackner, H., ed. (2014). *Why Yemen matters*. London: Saqi; Brehony, N. and al Sarhan, S., eds. (2015). *Rebuilding Yemen: political, economic and social challenges*. Berlin: Gerlach.

²³ Yemen Arab Republic, Central Planning Organisation. (1987). *Statistical Yearbook 1986*. San’a, p.49

²⁴ Yemen Arab Republic, Central Planning Organisation. (1987). *Op.cit* p.59.

²⁵ See: Carapico, S. and Tutwiler, R. (1981). *Yemeni agriculture and economic change: case studies of two highland regions*. San’a: American Institute for Yemeni Studies.

²⁶ Tutwiler, R. (1987), *op. cit.* p.407.

²⁷ Tutwiler, R. (1987), *op. cit.* p.556.

My experience in al Baidha governorate at that time confirms most of Tutwiler's analysis. In particular the reliance of 'ordinary' rural households on their migrant males for cash which, once daily needs were covered, was invested in buying a 4-wheel drive vehicle, building a new house, and then in income-generating investments such as drilling wells to irrigate their fields and change their cropping patterns, a shop, construction equipment or a small generator. At that time, if I met a young or middle-aged man when visiting a rural household, conversation was based on when they had come back from Saudi, when they were returning, how they were investing their earnings, what they thought of Saudi Arabia, and the like. The likelihood of them not being on a visit from their locale of migration was negligible. At the time with a population of 9.274 million, 1.168 million or 13% were international migrants²⁸, most of them in Saudi Arabia.

This commercially based rural economy was gradually modified by the emerging power of the military and security forces as Saleh (who came to power in 1978) expanded his control throughout the country through three basic mechanisms:

- subsidising selected tribal leaders once he had access to oil income after 1986;
- ensuring the presence everywhere of security agents, from the many security and military institutions he established;
- enrolling all local leaders (tribal and others) into the General People's Congress, a quasi-party which he created in 1982.

This process enabled those in political favour to accumulate wealth through appropriation, and created a real division within communities between the emerging kleptocrats (albeit on a small scale) and the rest of the population who felt oppressed. This also distorted the relations between citizens and tribal leaders.

In brief, by the time of unification in 1990, social structures had been significantly redesigned thanks to the emergence of new criteria for the definition of status, shifting from ascription based on occupation (artisan/trader, tribes, *sada*), to wealth (from migration, trade, concentration of land and corruption) and power, (based on the support for the Saleh regime necessary to receive cash handouts and increasing power of the security/military apparatus). The lowest social status group of *muhamasheen* or *akhdam* remained as it was and it became clear that discrimination against it was based on 'racial' and ethnic prejudice²⁹ rather than any other features.

The People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY)

Social and economic changes in the PDRY during the 1970s and 1980s were somewhat different. Although downplayed by the regime, migration played almost as significant a role in the life of most rural households. In 1988, out of a total of 2.345 million people, 238,150 or 10.15% were abroad.³⁰ Its importance was very considerable despite the regime's ambiguous attitude to migration as, while it provided foreign exchange and improved rural living standards it also reduced the labour force available within the country and was deplored as a 'brain drain.' While the majority of migrants were, as in the YAR, tribesmen from mountain villages with small agricultural holdings, they also included political exiles from different social strata, including people from urban areas.

The previously strong urban economy of Aden collapsed immediately after independence with the departure of the British from their military base and the closure of the Suez Canal after the 1967

²⁸ Yemen Arab Republic, Central Planning Organisation. (1987). *Op.cit*, p.31. This gave a lower percentage of out-migrants than earlier censuses, with 12.6%, whereas in 1981 the percentage was 16% and in 1975 19%, though some of this difference is likely to be due to different methodologies, let alone some inaccuracies.

²⁹ Walters, D. (1987). *Op.cit*.

³⁰ People's Democratic Republic of Yemen, Central Statistical Organization. (1989). *Statistical Yearbook 1988*, Aden, p.47.

Arab-Israeli war. Between them these events left the port idle, indeed it has never fully recovered. Despite ambiguous policies towards the private sector, during these decades Aden gradually developed a few industries which provided goods for the local market and reduced dependence on imports. Aden also remained the most important city: as the capital, it had an important administrative economy and until the 1980s it had the only university in the country.

Although to a lesser extent than claimed by the regime, in most areas the rural economy was transformed by the introduction of socialist-type cooperatives and state farms; the cooperatives did not everywhere live up to their intended objectives and many were simply marketing and input acquisition arrangements, leaving farm management largely as it had been previously. State farms were established on newly reclaimed lands and on the few large farms previously owned by some of the wealthier rulers of the protectorates. The main social impact of these changes was to formally make all farmers equal and remove the distinctions between tribal owners, sharecroppers and lower status cultivators.

The regime's ideological opposition to tribalism and commitment to socialism meant that deliberate efforts went into undermining the former social structure. Most tribal leaders, particularly those who had ruled the various statelets of the federation, emigrated; discrimination based on status was made illegal. Low status groups (particularly in Hadramaut with the previous *fellaheen/sada* relationship ended) were given land and thus acquired status similar to that of tribespeople; they also improved their status through education, achieving professional positions. Education played a big role in developing a social stratum of educated employees as teachers, medical workers and in administration, while the security apparatus was more concerned with dissidents within the Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP) than with the rest of the population. The Family Law improved women's status and gave women economic and social opportunities they had not had previously. The military, while important and mostly from tribal/mountainous areas, were involved in the factional struggles within the YSP, but the differences were largely personal or political, rather than based on tribal considerations.

In summary, by the time of unification, the PDRY's social structure was less tribal, more explicitly egalitarian, and its economy had socialist characteristics, with strengthened roles for the state and cooperative sectors. The gap between rich and poor was minimal, partly as a result of policy and partly thanks to the almost complete absence of corruption. The economy was more diversified, with some industries and a larger professional class; although migration played an important role, it was not a defining one. By 1990 the social structure of the PDRY did not fit firmly within the western description of a class society, but it was heading in the direction of an east European one, with the emergence of a modern economy with strong professional and administrative sectors. Changes in the social structure which had been initiated in the final decades of the protectorates had further developed during the socialist regime, even though they had taken a different direction in each of these two periods. But in both cases, the direction was one in which status was strongly associated with current activity, rather than with ascription.

The Republic of Yemen (RoY)

The two decades between unification and the full-scale crisis in 2011 saw some very significant changes in the social structure and the economy of the country. The main trends saw the whole of Yemen moving in the direction started in the YAR with the Saleh regime's ascendancy in the previous decade. But to briefly refer to the current situation, it is worth noting that one of the features which led to today's southern conflict is the speed with which the socio-economic and political character of the YAR was imposed on the citizens of the former PDRY without giving them any choice.

The fundamental changes which have affected Yemen's social, economic and political structures in this period are the following.

- Continued decline of the agricultural base of the economy. Rapid population growth as well as exacerbating social differentiation meant that on the one hand land was concentrated among a few wealthy landowners, particularly in the more productive and well irrigated areas such as the Tihama, while on the other hand in the densely populated highlands holding sizes shrank with each generation, as the number of people dependent on each *feddan*³¹ increased markedly. As tribespeople became poorer, they sold land, thus worsening their long-term prospects, and the vicious downward spiral continued. The loss of agricultural land resulting from close to two decades of neglect of the terraces, combined with rapid population growth, led to a situation where rural households were unable to achieve an acceptable living standard through their own fields and livestock. This has contributed to undermining the status of tribes as institutions and upholders of principles of social behaviour as people looked at the material achievements of people connected with the rewarding security sector.
- Although awareness of the country's absolute water shortage became an economic, social and political issue, the regime took little action to address this fundamental problem which threatens the very existence of the country. Instead, it facilitated favoured tribal leaders' access to credit and support for investment in irrigation pumps, allowing them to continue irrigating their crops as the water table lowered, and smallholders lost all access to water as their shallower wells dried up. In addition to contributing to the long-term depletion of the country's water resources, this worsened the gap between rich and poor within the tribes and thus contributed to social stresses and disaffection within tribes.
- The modern industrial sector remained under the control of a few large family enterprises, originally from the trader group, many of them from Taiz, Aden and Hodeida. They built food processing and other enterprises, which provided employment for a few thousand people. The sustainability and success of their enterprises was dependent on their willingness to collaborate with Saleh and his close associates: refusal to share profits with this group systematically led to serious problems of one kind or another.
- Income from the oil-based economy almost entirely ended up in the Saleh patronage system, and was used in part to finance the subsidies and cash handouts Saleh used to bolster his authority throughout the country. Oil was never the magic bullet which Yemenis had dreamt of as, at its peak, production was only about 400,000 b/d, an insignificant amount compared to the main peninsula and Gulf producers. Unfortunately it was not used to finance productive development investments, laying the foundations for a post-oil economy. The economy therefore continued to be based on trade and imports, thus further enriching the small group of importers allied with the Saleh regime. The often mentioned disaffection of the tribes in the Mareb³² area is very much due to the fact that, although their governorate is one of the main oil producers, they were not given access to electricity or other services as they were not in favour with the Saleh clique.
- There was very limited progress in many of the investments necessary for a healthy economy: the education system suffered from very low standards preventing the emergence of a knowledge-based economy. Lack of opportunities for the graduates from secondary schools and universities discouraged youth. Urbanisation created a large population of temporary and permanent residents increasingly frustrated at their unemployment, who witnessed daily the worsening gap between the impoverished majority and the ostentatious wealth of the minority. Many of these were tribesmen who experienced this deterioration in their social

³¹ 1 *feddan* is about 1 acre or 0.42 hectare

³² The status of tribal leaders' role in conflict mediation in the first decade of 2000s in al Baidha, Mareb, Shabwa, and Jawf is discussed in al Dawsari, N. et al. (2012). *Yemen community-based conflict mitigation programme*. Partners for Democratic Change International. Available at: <http://www.pdci-network.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/baseline-assessment-without-annexes.pdf> [Accessed 18 Jun. 2016].

status as acute shame, as they stood on street corners waiting for unskilled work as daily labourers.

- The transformation of the tribal system took off in a big way, seriously undermining its earlier characteristics as described in most texts on the nature of tribes: there was a reduction in solidarity and in egalitarianism through a process of politicisation based on community leaders' relationship with the Saleh regime. The main criterion to retain or increase power was support for the Saleh regime. This was essential to ensure access to financial subsidies, state employment opportunities mainly in the military/security sectors, and development projects which shaykhs needed to fulfil their 'traditional' obligations of hospitality and care to their tribespeople. These became all the more indispensable in the face of deteriorating economic circumstances.³³ While in the past a poor but honourable tribal leader's decisions and skills were respected and ensured he remained in position and popular, in the transformed circumstances a leader lost support unless he could provide jobs or financial assistance, given the need resulting from rapid population growth and reduced opportunities. However, tribal shaykhs continued to solve conflicts within their communities and this enabled them to retain some influence. One way or another, tribal leaders' independence was reduced or even entirely eliminated; a shaykh who did not cooperate with the Saleh regime was liable to find himself deposed or face critical difficulties for himself and his group.³⁴ Saleh did not, and indeed could not, select or depose shaykhs directly. Instead he and his agents discreetly and indirectly sponsored intra- and inter-tribal conflicts which would eventually lead to changes and the promotion of one of his supporters. This affected not only opponents to the regime but also any group which did not explicitly support it.
- A decline in the importance of the traditional ascribed social statuses: the new twin markers of status became wealth and access to central power. Though there were obviously exceptions, tribesmen and *sada* were no longer respected for upholding the values of honour and just behaviour. As wealth and the ability to provide material benefits became the main criteria for high status, so traders became powerful through their ability to make gifts and loans and investments and, as a result tribesmen as well as *sada* became involved in trade themselves. Trade changed its status from low to high status.³⁵
- The rise of 'political' parties, in particular Saleh's General People's Congress (GPC) and the Islah as 'new' mechanisms of access to status and benefits.
- The domination of a military/security elite, led by individuals close to Saleh through kin or agnatic relations, and composed mainly of men from his own sub-tribe as well as others based in neighbouring areas. They were (and largely still are) above the law and used their positions first to enforce Saleh's aims and second for private benefit, each in proportion to his rank. Leaders include some of the more efficient and better known kleptocrats.³⁶ They have accumulated wealth through land, industry and control or participation in the major economic enterprises.³⁷
- In the southern governorates, in addition to all the above features, was added the return of exiles, many of whom intended to take revenge on those who had supported the socialist

³³ For most tribespeople, poverty is considered shameful, see: Weir, S. (2007), *op. cit.* p.42.

³⁴ See, among others: Peterson, J. (2008). *Tribes and politics in Yemen*. Arabian Peninsula Background Note, APBN 007, p.10.

³⁵ An interesting example of changed living conditions and status in San'a and Taiz is given in: Carapico, S. and Myntti, C. (2016). A tale of two families: change in north Yemen, 1977-89. In: Carapico, S. ed., *Arabia incognita: dispatches from Yemen and the Gulf*, 1st ed. Charlottesville: Just World Books.

³⁶ The importance of this group is explained in: Hill, G. et al. (2013). *Yemen, corruption, capital flight and global drivers of conflict*. London: Chatham House.

³⁷ See among others: Peterson, J. (2008), *op. cit.* pp.10-11.

regime and, as they saw it, usurped their status. Those who had stayed (or not known any other regime) were not only deprived of the benefits they took for granted (free health care and education, access to jobs, access to land for the previous sharecroppers and tenants, a basic living standard) but, in addition, saw both returnees and members of the kleptocratic group being privileged and appropriating land and other assets which had previously been theirs to use, if not to own. Inflation and the loss of jobs were additional causes of resentment, particularly after the 1994 civil war. These former exiles' contemptuous attitude to those who had been encouraged to consider themselves equal citizens created resentment.

- At the village and household levels, the economy based on international migration³⁸ was replaced by one based on internal migration whose financial benefits were far lower. Local migration is short-term and far less rewarding: the men waiting to be hired on urban street corners are mostly rural tribesmen, not all of them young, whose families are dependent on the income they can bring or send back. However, alongside the deterioration of the agriculturally based sources of income, and given the stresses brought by poverty, this dependence on casual labour increases tensions within households as the men migrating for shorter periods for low status work in the towns and cities both return home more frequently and provide less income. A dramatic change from rapidly improving living standards in the 1970s and 1980s to bare survival in the 1990s and 2000s accentuated tensions. Either way, the main income earners remain the younger generation of men, some of whom become reluctant to obey their elders.

By contrast with the situation in the 1970s and 80s, when Yemenis throughout the country experienced gradually improving living standards and were optimistic for their own and their children's future, the situation was reversed after unification in 1990. Only a few months later, Yemen refused to approve a United Nations Security Council resolution authorising armed intervention to address the crisis arising from the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait. This led to the expulsion of over 800,000 Yemenis from Saudi Arabia and its neighbours, simultaneously putting an end to the remittances they had sent and adding to the unemployed labour force. Another consequence was a serious reduction of bilateral and multilateral international development assistance, thus jeopardising the new state's prospects. In the following years, living conditions for Yemenis continued to decline with the adoption of structural adjustment policies, misuse of oil revenues, and misguided development policies. While the majority of the population suffered, a small group of primarily military-security families close to Saleh, as well as of a few other traders and business people, prospered and ostentatiously displayed their largely ill-gotten gains.

The professional middle class which might have been expected to emerge through the strengthening of a modern capitalist economy and higher educational standards was numerically insignificant as inflation, corruption and rising living costs held it back. People were compelled to remain dependent on tribal and other personal connections to cope with daily administrative and other problems. Many who might have been expected to be part of this group, such as teachers and health workers, remained poor. The majority of rural tribespeople subsisted from a combination of cultivation, livestock and the casual labour of their men in the towns, but overall were being gradually impoverished. The period was marked by the absence of political organisations or entities proposing programmes which would solve people's problems. The notable exception was the Islamist section of the Islah party which gained support throughout the country. Although urbanisation increased considerably, and San'a itself became a city of about 2 million people, 70% of Yemen's population remained rural.

³⁸ Although by the 2000s the number of Yemenis in Saudi Arabia had again risen to about one million, this represents about half of what it had done twenty years earlier as a proportion of the Yemeni population. Moreover their working conditions were far less rewarding, so the impact did not compare. See Thiollet, H. (2014). The changing dynamics of migration in Yemen. In: Lackner, H., ed., *Why Yemen matters*. London: Saqi, p.273.



Separatist flags in Mukalla, May 2013. (Copyright Helen Lackner).



View of Sana'a old City, 2011. (Copyright Helen Lackner).



Taiz, men looking for work, May 2009. (Copyright Helen Lackner).



Tribesmen meeting, Dhamar Governorate, 2006. (Copyright Helen Lackner).

Against an objective background of the doubling of the population and notable water shortages, both major contributing causes of the economic crisis, this period saw a fundamental change in the social structure of the country which can be summarised as follows.

- The importance of tribes and tribal norms declined markedly: tribal leaders either consolidated their positions through their Saleh connections or lost power and their positions in favour of others who were aligned with the Saleh regime, either directly or through his representatives in each community. Representatives at the local level could be the GPC office, local government administrators, or overt and covert security personnel. Many shaykhs also became 'city shaykhs' as they needed to be in San'a to be close to the real power to get the financial and other support they sought, and tribes people who needed them either had to wait for shaykh's visits home or travel to San'a themselves.
- Real power was concentrated among Saleh and his closest cronies who had transformed the tribal tradition of arms-bearing and protection of their group into a modern military/security apparatus which acted with impunity and sold its support.
- Status based on occupation and birth was replaced in practical terms by status based on wealth, regardless of how it had been acquired. This was particularly acute given the worsening poverty of the vast majority of the population who were forced by circumstances to comply with demands for bribes and to seek the assistance of people whom they really despised. This further undermined the moral fabric of the tribal social structure.
- Finally the rise in unemployment and the changed economic circumstances within households and villages meant that the younger generations were increasingly frustrated and disaffected, being unable to achieve basic ambitions.³⁹

THE CURRENT CRISIS: THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE EMERGING SOCIAL STRUCTURES

The revolutionary movement which coincided with the Arab Spring in 2011 had been long expected. The points made above show that the gradual deterioration in material and ethical living conditions in the country had become an explosive mix. There was widespread demand for fundamental change. Saleh was determined to continue extracting whatever wealth he could, as well as hang on to power and indeed pass it on to his son. Nor was he willing to abandon kleptocracy or make any serious concessions to the needs of the population. This paper cannot address in detail all issues, including the Huthi wars, the rise of the separatist movement or many others, I will examine two aspects of the crisis in which the previous decades' transformations in the country's social structure are particularly relevant: the relationship between tribes and political parties and the rise of *jihadism*.

Tribes and political parties

Yemen has a multiplicity of so-called political parties. However, they do not play the roles which many of us associate with such organisations. The largest is the General People's Congress (GPC), Saleh's party, currently split between his supporters and those of president Hadi. It is not really a party in the normal sense of the word, as it has no specific political programme which would differentiate it from others. It was created in 1982 on Saleh's initiative to bring together as many local personalities of all kinds as he could, whether tribal leaders, *sada* or others, into an organisation whose sole purpose was to support him. At the time of elections it publicises certain programmatic intentions. It has branches and representatives throughout the country, including many individuals connected with the security services. Its local agents ensure that people turn out to vote for Saleh or his supporters in local and parliamentary elections. It systematically attempts to co-opt anyone who emerges as a local personality; most of the time successfully. Involvement with the GPC is one of the means to access jobs and other advantages. Its national presence goes beyond any regional, tribal or

³⁹ For examples of this problem, see: USAID, Education Development Centre Inc. (2008). *Yemen cross-sectoral youth assessment: final report*, p.33. Available at: http://www.youthpolicy.org/national/Yemen_2008_Youth_Assessment_Report.pdf [Accessed 18 Jun. 2016].

other group allegiances, and thus it could have become a base on which to build a genuine national democratic entity. Indeed, the late Dr Abdul Karim al Eryani tried to move it in that direction. His initiative was defeated by Saleh's determination to retain his position as an all-powerful authoritarian ruler.

The second most important party is the Islah (officially the Congregation for Reform); it combines two main interest groups: Hashed tribesmen, (one of the two main tribal confederations of the far north), on the one hand, and Muslim Brothers on the other. It thus brings together conservative Muslims upholding some tribal norms and a Muslim Brotherhood political programme. Some of the leaders of the second branch, Abdul Majid al Zindani and Ali Mohsen al Ahmar in particular, can be said to be at the more extremist end of that spectrum, closer to *jihadis* than the more moderate branch. Ali Mohsen is one of the most controversial figures in the current crisis, and was appointed Vice President of the government in exile in April 2016.

Islah's popularity throughout the country resides in the fact that it is the only party which offers a genuinely popular programme. Many people from under-privileged groups, including the low status social strata, have joined it. As stated by Rodionov (2006) with reference to Hadramaut, 'another way of getting rid of hereditary stigma is to join an Islamic organization or political party, e.g. al-Islah, which stresses the principle of equality of all Muslims before God and People.'⁴⁰ Here Rodionov refers to the low status *fellaheen* who had lost the lands received under the socialist system of the PDRY through the re-privatization policies in the mid-1990s. However, in my view there were two additional factors leading this group to support Islah: first was the condescending, not to say insulting, treatment they received from the returned *sada*, tribesmen and other newly privileged groups. The second was the fact that they had lost faith in the ability of the Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP) to protect their interests after 1994, when it was seriously weakened. Their support for the Islah enabled that party to have significant representation from the southern governorates in Parliament: of the 10 MPs from Wadi Hadramaut in the last parliament elected in 2003, two were independents, four from the GPC and four from Islah.

The Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP) now sees itself as a social democratic party and is part of the Socialist International, alongside the British Labour Party and so many others. This transformation was an important step. However, from the point of view of the situation in Yemen, it was and still is seen as the party of the southerners, even though much of its current leadership and membership are from the former YAR. Its failure to support southern separatism has lost it much support. It split in 1994 as most of its members supported unity and did not go with the breakaway secessionist group. The YSP, the Baathist or Nasserist parties, are the only parties which can be conventionally described as standard political parties. Their lack of 'tribal' base and inability or unwillingness to provide material benefits also contribute to their weakness. By contrast, al Haqq and the Union of Popular Forces are *sada* parties, so here membership is clearly based on inherited status loyalty.

Overall political parties have not become standard institutions or mechanisms for those seeking political progress or change, primarily because election after election demonstrated the complete control over the political process of the Saleh clique, sometimes in alliance with Islah. This remained the case regardless of the regime's failure, deliberate or otherwise, to create an economy allowing the population to improve its living conditions. This was achieved through the GPC's capacity to provide material benefits as well as systematic manipulation of the electoral process.

Given that they are the vast majority of the population, tribespeople are the main members of parties, while members of other social status groups are also involved. However, membership of the GPC is primarily due to its usefulness in obtaining jobs or assistance. The Islamist faction of Islah can be said to partly represent lower status groups, and Islah as a whole is also often in a position to provide certain advantages such as employment in the al Ahmar business empire. By contrast the other parties

⁴⁰ Rodionov, M. (2006). Social re-stratification in modern Hadramawt. *Quaderni di Studi Arabi*, nuova serie, 1, p.184.

can provide few practical benefits: the YSP can be seen as the party of the middle class and intellectuals committed to social democracy, regardless of their origins. While the two *sada* parties are the only ones to be clearly associated with a formal ascribed social status.

The following incident contributes to understanding many Yemenis' attitudes to parties. When the Huthis ransacked the home of Sadeq al Ahmar, the leader of the once-powerful Hashed tribal confederation, and leader of the Islah party, other tribal shaykhs considered this unacceptable: "Hashed as a tribe was insulted. We are tribal leaders first before we are heads of political parties. What we saw from Houthis supporters and their militia is scary. They've insulted sheikhs like us in other places."⁴¹

The National Dialogue Conference was the main political element of the transition process which started in 2011. Of its 565 seats, 298 were allocated to political parties. But this gave a majority to what could be described as the existing political elite. The overall failure of the NDC can in large part be attributed to the vested interests of many of its members, and particularly those representing the two major political parties, Islah (50 members), and the GPC (112 members). This situation is also currently reproduced to a significant extent among the membership of the delegations to the Kuwait negotiations in 2016.

The attraction of *Jihadism*

Manipulation of the relationship between tribes and extremists has been a sustained theme in recent years. Particularly in the media, but also in officialdom, there has been a tendency to take a simplistic approach based on the widespread prejudices about tribes, and to link the concept of tribalism with the presence of al Qaeda and other *jihadi* groups, mostly to reflect negatively on tribes. Among recent examples is the following quotation from Yahya Saleh, nephew of ex-President Saleh, who commanded the Central Security Forces (CSF) until 2012. "The coalition between extremist groups and tribal units made it difficult to fight the terrorists, some tribes sympathized with the terrorists."⁴² Coming from him in particular, this needs to be taken with a large dose of salt; however, it is worth noting that such a statement is taken seriously by an authoritative publication such as *Foreign Policy*, which journal also fails to address critically Yahya's role in the Saleh regime.

In early 2016, media coverage systematically stated that Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) was in control of Hadramaut Governorate with tribal support. When AQAP left Mukalla, the governorate capital, it was asserted in an equally blanket manner that the *jihadis* had now been expelled from Hadramaut. Such claims are misleading. While AQAP certainly had a presence in coastal Hadramaut, they did not control the majority of that governorate, as the Wadi, and the northern and southern plateaux have remained loyal to the internationally recognised regime in exile since the beginning of the war. Similarly the majority of the coast in Hadramaut and all the way to Aden is occupied by a series of isolated fishing settlements, so, while AQAP may have had influence in certain villages, it certainly did not control the whole coast; for example, the area around Ahwar in Abyan is one where the long-lasting historic dissidence of the Bakazem has been equated with support for AQAP, which is inaccurate.

Moreover AQAP were not driven out of Hadramaut or indeed Abyan or Shabwa: deals were made, largely thanks to mediation from local tribal leaders, allowing them to leave, in most cases with their weapons, including heavy ones. As for tribal support, the first point to make is that tribes are not as

⁴¹ Statement by Abdul Wahed Numrana, shaykh from the Murad tribe, one of the five major tribes of Marib, and the leader of the GPC, in: Dawsari, N. (9 Feb. 2015). Yemen: the enemy of my enemy is al Qaeda. *MENASource*, *Atlantic Council*. Available at: <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/yemen-the-enemy-of-my-enemy-is-al-qaeda> [Accessed: 18 Jun. 2016].

⁴² Watling, J. and Shabibi, N. (19 May 2016). How the war on terror failed Yemen. The West decided to make fighting al Qaeda its top priority — and only ended up making things worse. *Foreign Policy*. Available at: <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/05/18/how-the-war-on-terror-failed-yemen/> [Accessed: 18 Jun. 2016].

significant a demographic force in Hadramaut as they are elsewhere in Yemen, particularly in the coastal areas. With respect to support from the population, Hadramis in general are extremely attached to the tombs of their saints, and the AQAP practice of destroying them was certainly not welcome, nor indeed was their forbidding of any manifestation of southern separatism, another fairly strong tendency in coastal Hadramaut. Their military strength was also connected with their cooperative relationship with local bases of the Republican Guards, i.e. supporters of the Saleh/Huthi alliance. More examples could be dissected of the inaccuracy of assertions of AQAP power in Yemen, in particular the frequently mentioned occupation by Ansar al Shari'a (AQAP local group) of Ja'ar in Abyan in 2011-12.

Instead I will move on to the opposing claims - where tribes are helping fight the *jihadis*. There are numerous cases of tribes fighting the *jihadis*, including those in Mareb,⁴³ reputed to be among the most independent tribes with least allegiance to San'ani authorities (whoever they might be at any time). In 2010, the United States hired tribesmen to hunt Al-Qaeda in Shabwa province: "Hassan Bannan, a leader of one of the Awalik branches in Shabwa and an opponent of the policy, told The Associated Press that more than 2,500 tribesmen have been divided into small groups to carry out daily searches. Another tribesman, Awad al-Awlaki, said 180 of his fellow tribesmen in the Shabwa town of al-Saaid each received 100 automatic rifle bullets and a daily stipend of \$50."⁴⁴ However, it is worth noting that the Awlaqi are also the tribe of Anwar al Awlaqi the US citizen AQAP propagandist, who was killed by a US drone strike in 2011; he was living among his tribespeople when he was killed.

An example of the complexity of reality is the situation in al Baidha. For the past year or two there have been numerous reports about close cooperation between tribes and AQAP. Here it is a clear case of both groups opposing the Huthi-Saleh alliance, hence it is reasonable for both to fight together against their common enemy. This does not mean, contrary to what is often said, that al Baidha's tribes are supporters of AQAP, but simply that they currently have a common enemy: of about 15 tribes present in the governorate only small sections of four of them are committed *jihadis*; these include some leading families who have become notorious as a result of this association.

These few examples have shown that the relationship between tribes and *jihadism* is far more complex than usually presented, and that it is essential to look at it closely, rather than generalise widely. To understand this relationship it is essential to have an accurate understanding of the basic characteristics of the country's current social composition; they have been mentioned earlier in this paper. With 70% of Yemen's population tribal and roughly the same percentage rural (with a high level of overlap) there are about 18 million tribespeople. It is therefore likely that a fair proportion of the Yemeni membership of AQAP and Daesh would be tribesmen. There is also significant evidence to suggest that low status groups are attracted to these organisations due to their rejection of inherited status categories: that was the case of the people who remained in Ja'ar (Abyan) when it was under the control of Ansar al Shari'a (AQAP) in 2011-12. Almost everyone else, and particularly all the tribespeople, left the town but having been given some power low status people stayed around. Similarly, as mentioned above, many of the low status groups in Wadi Hadramaut had shifted their allegiance from the YSP to Islah after unification because that party treated them as citizens: some of their youth may well have chosen to join more extremist forms of Islamism.

As was pointed out to me frequently in the field in recent decades, another major factor has been the weakening authority of older male household heads and tribal leaders resulting from the changed socio-economic relationships within households and communities. As the main cash income providers, younger men have sometimes challenged the authority of their elders in the nuclear and

⁴³ Dawsari, N. (9 Feb. 2015), *op. cit.*

⁴⁴ Associated Press, San'a, (25 Oct. 2010). Yemen recruits tribesmen to hunt al-Qaeda. *Al Arabiya*. Available at: <https://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2010/10/25/123629.html> [Accessed: 18 Jun. 2016]; Whitaker, B. (26 Oct. 2010). Yemen strikes tribal alliance against al-Qaeda. *Al-bab.com*. Available at: http://www.al-bab.com/blog/blog1010b.htm#yemen_strikes_tribal_alliance_against_al-qaeda [Accessed: 18 Jun. 2016].

extended families, as a form of protest, to assert their adulthood, or strengthen their own status within the community. In some cases, particularly where there were influential figures encouraging it, this has taken the form of joining AQAP or, more recently, Daesh. This does not mean that the families, let alone the communities of those involved, support the organisation. However, tribal hospitality rules have sometimes forced people to host the comrades of their own 'dissidents', for short periods of time.

There are also numerous cases of tribal leaders mediating between AQAP and the authorities or official military forces to ensure the safety of their communities by assisting the peaceful withdrawal of AQAP forces, as mentioned above, most recently in Zinjibar in Abyan and Azzan in Shabwa, as well as in coastal Hadramaut. The fact that both sides are willing to benefit from the mediation of the tribes does not mean that either of them has the tribes' support, but simply that the tribal leaders want to ensure the maximum safety and minimum fighting for their people. Good local leaders, whether tribal or otherwise, have as prime objectives the protection and safeguarding of their communities. This may mean opposing the *jihadis* with arms, or it may mean tolerating them for one reason or another.

The myth of AQAP-tribal collusion is one which conveniently enables outside 'observers' and 'experts' to claim knowledge, rather than admit that situations are complex and requiring detailed information and analysis. It also serves the interests of those who need *jihadism* as a bogeyman, to spread fear among ordinary people everywhere. This is an important factor in keeping the 'security' business going and expanding. Understanding the reality of this, and indeed other, features of Yemeni society, would lead to better decisions, which might avoid exacerbating the conflicts and popular disaffection in Yemen and beyond. There is no doubt that accurate understanding requires committed and long-term knowledge of specific circumstances in each area. Political and military exigencies tend to push policy makers to adopt short-term solutions that fit into their existing political programmes. At the moment *jihadism* is a reality, but not on the scale publicised. It is also a convenient enemy that can be easily demonised, making it much easier to pursue this crude and populist discourse rather than develop a more sophisticated and helpful approach to Yemen's complex and multiple problems. This politically fashionable approach is another example of the specificity of the country being suborned to facile policies which, in the case of *jihadism* in particular, have been proved to be so inappropriate and unsuccessful elsewhere over the past decade. Over the past fifteen years, the international community's prioritisation of counter terrorism, at the expense of so many other more urgent issues for the Yemeni people as a whole, has contributed to the deterioration of the overall political, economic and social conditions. The media and the counter-terrorism think-tank experts have, through their simplistic analyses, facilitated bad decision-making by policy makers among Yemen's main international partners.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

While much of what I have said is very specific to the Yemeni context, one conclusion which is valid well beyond Yemen relates to the disaffection and frustration of youth. Yemen is by no means alone in having hundreds of thousands of young people with varying levels of education whose future is bleak, with a lack of urban employment prospects, with collapsed household agricultural economies who are therefore pessimistic about their ability to improve their prospects through traditional political parties. Faced with this, it is not surprising that some youths succumb to the attraction of extremist organisations which offer them empowerment, as well as simple recipes for solutions. What is more surprising is that these youths still remain a very small minority.

Almost ten years ago Peterson made a statement which reflects fairly well many of the points I have made in this paper: 'it is wide off the mark to assert that there is a collective tribal political consciousness. Instead the tribes and tribespeople constitute constituencies within broader political aggregations.... Tribesmen pursue political or military careers the same as other Yemenis... prominent shaykhs and sons of shaykhs occupy a number of GPC seats in parliament... tribes people constitute a... majority of Yemen's population and so it is no surprise that a member of a particular

tribe should be elected to parliament in his tribal district. Furthermore it is not surprising that ambitious individuals, whether tribal or not, should ally themselves with the GPC, the most powerful party in Yemen and the party of the president.⁴⁵

I have demonstrated that, while tribes constitute the majority of Yemen's population, fundamental changes in the country's social and economic structure in the past half century have expanded political allegiances beyond tribes. Such changes have also allowed some non-tribal individuals, particularly among those of low status, to achieve full citizenship. The changes in the country's economic base, from being primarily agricultural to being based on trade, administration, and the military, have contributed to weakening the power of tribes *per se*. Most fundamentally, the rise of what has become known as the kleptocratic-tribal-military nexus has not in fact been the rise of tribal power as such, but rather of a small clique around Saleh, composed primarily of his immediate relatives, people from his local sub-tribe and its neighbouring ones. Not entirely facetiously, it could be suggested that his attempt to pass on the presidency to his son reflects his ambition to be Yemen's most powerful 'super'-shaykh (*shaykh mashaykh*) and to establish a dynasty on a tribal basis. Given that higher ranking Hashed, particularly the sons of Shaykh Abdullah Hussain al Ahmar, are among his most bitter opponents today, this could also be seen as an attempt to shift leadership within the Hashed confederation to his own minor branch. In this context, Saleh's current alliance with the Huthis takes on yet another meaning.

Many observers see the current war as nothing but a struggle between members of the military-political-economic elite and, to some extent, my argument in the preceding paragraph endorses such a view. This is certainly a major, possibly the main, reason holding back progress in the Kuwait peace negotiations in mid-2016. However, a solution which only addresses this intra-elite power struggle will not be viable. It will leave Yemen with its many major problems intact: these include an unsustainable governance, absolute water shortage, insufficient natural resources, low educational standards. Such a short-term solution would also mean that the suffering, starvation, destruction and death which 25 million Yemenis have had to face daily since early 2015 will have been in vain, an outcome sad beyond words. Therefore, I can only hope that those engaged in the negotiations, with the help and advice available to them, will at long last cease to focus on their personal interests and give priority to the needs of the Yemeni people, already the poorest in the Arab world before all this began.

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29 June 2016

⁴⁵ Peterson, J. (2008), *op. cit.* p.15.

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